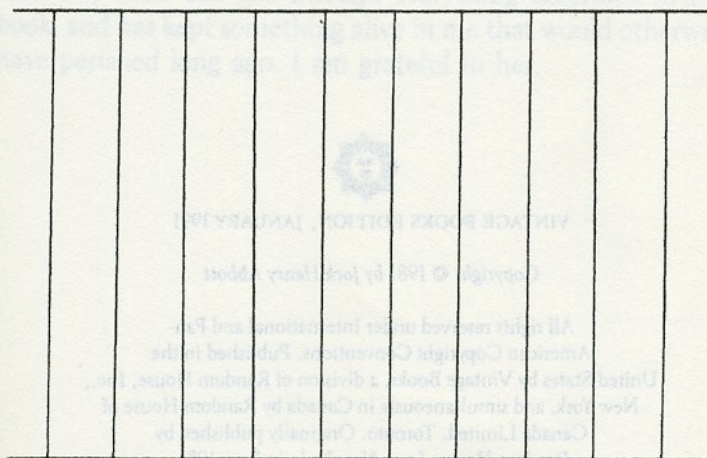


IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

Letters from Prison



JACK HENRY ABBOTT

With an Introduction by Norman Mailer

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Especially your malice.
So do not apologize to me.

I have walked stooped beneath your heart,
That cold-blooded crown
That holds the glinting jewel
Of contradiction in your eyes.

I think that I shall gouge them
From your skull
And crush them in my fist

—Give you a dog to see with
Give you eyes that pant and salivate,
Eyes that creep on all fours—
Eyes that cringe at the sound of my voice;
Lie to me then.

Tell me life is good to you
—When all your memories are distilled
Into the transformed image, the Idea,
Of a mechanical hand reaching
To dig out your eyes.

Lie to me then.

Lie to me then, Dog-eyes.

Lie to me then.

This is a poem I wrote in the arms of the prison muse
Paranoia here in the hole.

To be capable of writing something so mentally deranged—
to be able to write nothing else that expresses my social reaction
to life—is very perplexing to me.

I wrote it this morning amid the infernal racket of a hundred
caged prisoners in single cells—racket of threats, race-talking
like there was no tomorrow.

I was born January 21, 1944, on a military base in Oscoda,
Michigan. I was in and out of foster homes almost from the

moment of my birth. My formal education: I never completed the sixth grade. At age nine I began serving long stints in juvenile detention quarters. At age twelve I was sent to the Utah State Industrial School for Boys. I was "paroled" once for about sixty days, then returned there. At age eighteen I was released as an adult. Five or six months later I was sent to the Utah State Penitentiary for the crime of "issuing a check against insufficient funds." I went in with an indeterminate sentence of up to five years. About three years later, having never been released, I killed one inmate and wounded another in a fight in the center hall. I was tried for the capital offense under the old convict statute that requires either *mandatory* death if malice *aforethought* is found, or a sentence of from three to twenty years. I received the latter sentence. An "indeterminate term" is what justifies the concept of *parole*. Your good behavior determines how long you stay in prison. The law merely sets a minimum and a maximum—the underlying assumption being that *no one* serves the maximum. A wrong assumption in my case. At age twenty-six I escaped for about six weeks.

I am at this moment thirty-seven years old. Since age twelve I have been free the sum total of nine and a half months. I have served many terms in solitary. In only three terms I have served over ten years there. I would estimate that I have served a good fourteen or fifteen years in solitary. The only serious crime I have ever committed in free society was bank robbery during the time I was a fugitive.

It was a big red-brick building with two wings. It stood about four stories high. It was constructed by the U.S. Army back when the state was still a territory. It was one of several buildings that had served as disciplinary barracks for the military. These barracks had long ago passed into the hands of the state and were part of a juvenile penal institution.

In the basement of the big red-brick building were rows of

solitary confinement cells. The basement was entered from outside the building only.

I am about twelve or thirteen years old. It is winter. I am marching in a long double-file of boys. We are marching to the mess hall. There is a guard watching as we march toward him. There is a guard walking behind us as we march.

My testes shrink and the blood is rushing and my eyes burn, ache. My heart is pounding and I am trying hard to breath slowly, to control myself.

I keep glancing at the guards: in front and behind the line.

The fields beyond are plowed and covered with an icy blanket of snow. I do not know how far beyond those fields my freedom lies.

Suddenly my confederate at the front of the line whirls and slugs the boy behind him. The front guard, like an attack dog, is on them both—beating them into submission. Seconds later the guard at the back rushes forward, brushing me as he passes.

I break away from the line, and run *for my life*. I stretch my legs as far as I can, and as quickly as I can, but the legs of a boy four feet six inches tall cannot stretch very far.

The fields are before me, a still flatland of ice and snow, and the huge clods of frozen, plowed earth are to me formidable obstacles. The sky is baby-blue, almost white. The air is clear.

I haven't covered fifty yards when I hear the pursuit begin: "You! Stop!" I immediately know I will be caught, but I continue to run.

I do not feel the blow of his fist. I'm in midair for a moment, and then I'm rolling in frozen clods of soil. I am pulled to my feet; one of my arms is twisted behind my back; my lungs are burning with the cold air; my nostrils are flared. I am already trying to steel myself for the punishment to come.

The other inmates stand in a long straight line, flanked by guards, and I am dragged past them. I do not respect them, because they will not run—will not try to escape. My legs are too short to keep up with the guard, who is effortlessly holding my arm twisted high up behind my back, so I stumble along, humiliated. I try hard to be dignified.

I see the door to the basement of the red-brick building, and we are approaching it in good time. A snowflake hits my eye and melts. It is beginning, softly, to snow.

At the top of the stairs to the basement, I am flung down against a high black-steel door. I stand beside it at attention as the guard takes out a huge ring of keys and bangs on the door. We are seen through a window. The door yawns open and an old guard appears, gazing at me maliciously.

We enter. We are standing at the top of a number of wide concrete steps that descend to the floor of the basement. I am thrown down the stairs, and I lie on the floor, waiting. My nose is bleeding and my ears are ringing from blows to my skull.

"Get up!"

Immediately I am knocked down again.

"Strip!"

I stand, shakily, and shed my clothing. His hands are pulling my hair, but I dare not move.

"Turn around!"

I turn.

"Bend over!"

I bend over. He inspects my anus and my private parts, and I watch, anxiously, hoping with all my might he does not hurt me there.

He orders me to follow him.

We enter a passageway between rows of heavy steel doors. The passage is narrow; it is only four or five feet wide and is dimly lighted. As soon as we enter, I can smell nervous sweat and feel body warmth in the air.

We stop at one of the doors. He unlocks it. I enter. Nothing is said. He closes and locks the door, and I can hear his steps as he walks down the dark passageway.

In the cell, there is a barred window with an ancient, heavy mesh-steel screen. It is level with the ground outside. The existing windowpanes are caked with decades of soil, and the screen prevents cleaning them. Through the broken ones I peer, running free again in my mind across the fields.

A sheet of thick plywood, on iron legs bolted to the floor,

is my bed. An old-fashioned toilet bowl is in the corner, beside a sink with cold running water. A dim light burns in a dull yellow glow behind the thick iron screening attached to the wall.

The walls are covered with names and dates—some of the dates go back twenty years. They were scratched into the wall. There are ragged hearts pierced with arrows and *pachuco* crosses everywhere. Everywhere are the words: "mom," "love," "god"—the walls sweat and are clammy and cold.

Because I am allowed only my undershorts, I move about to keep warm.

When my light was turned out at night, I would weep uncontrollably. Sixty days in solitary was a long, long time in those days for me.

When the guard's key would hit the lock on my door to signal the serving of a "meal," if I were not standing at attention in the far corner of the cell, facing it, the guard would attack me with a ring of keys on a heavy chain.

I was fed one-third of a regular meal three times a day. Only one day a week I was taken from my cell and ordered to shower while the guard stood in the shower-room doorway and timed me for three minutes.

Locked in our cells, we could not see one another, and if we were caught shouting cell-to-cell, we were beaten. We tapped out messages, but if they heard our taps, we were beaten—the entire row of cells, one child at a time.

I served five years in the big red-brick building, and altogether, two or three in solitary confinement. When I walked out, I was considered an adult, subject to adult laws.

I served so long because I could not adjust to the institution and tried to escape over twenty times. I had been there for the juvenile "crime" of "failure to adjust to foster homes."

... He who is state-raised—reared by the state from an early age after he is taken from what the state calls a "broken home"—learns over and over and all the days of his life that people